WESTERN PLAZA
(Reservation Nos. 32 and 33)
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-696

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WESTERN PLAZA
(Reservation Nos. 32 and 33)

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Location: Rectangle formed by the intersection of Pennsylvania Avenue and E streets, between 13th and 14th streets, NW, and bounded by City Square Nos. 226, 254, 255, 256, and 291.

Owner/Manager: Jointly owned by the U.S. and District of Columbia governments; maintained by the National Park Service.

Present Use: This monumental space is a pedestrian park as well as a site for seasonal performances and cultural events.

Significance: Indicated as an open space on the L'Enfant Plan, this intersection was developed in the nineteenth century as two triangular reservations. As part of the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation plan of the 1960s-80s, it was redesigned as a large park featuring the central portion of the L'Enfant Plan as the pavement scheme.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: Included on L'Enfant's 1791 plan as an open area two blocks south of the White House.

2. Original and subsequent owners: The land that was transferred to the federal government to create this intersection was owned by David Burnes.[1]

3. First improvement and subsequent alterations:

1853: $5,112.49 allocated for "embellishing the triangular spaces at Pennsylvania Avenue between 13th and 14th streets."

1887: Walks laid and horse fountain installed on the 13th Street side of Reservation No. 33.

1904: Reservation No. 32 transferred to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia for an approach to a municipal building.

1909: Statue of Alexander Robey Shepherd erected in front of the District Building.

1910: Equestrian statue of Count Casimir Pulaski erected in Reservation No. 33, improved especially for the occasion.

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[1] McNeil, 42.

1931:	Shepherd statue moved to Reservation No. 32.
1958:	2,516 square feet of Reservation No. 33 transferred to D.C. for a roadway.
1960:	New landscape plan executed in Reservation No. 33.
1980:	Reservation Nos. 32 and 33 merged, and relandscaped as a large rectangular plaza.

B. Historical Context:

On Pierre L'Enfant's design of the city, this space was the westernmost of three open squares along Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the Capitol Grounds. As designed, it probably would have afforded a view to the south down a wide street on axis with the Potomac River. After L'Enfant was dismissed, Andrew Ellicott used L'Enfant's plans to develop the engraved plan for the city. Ellicott moved the open space one block west and omitted the broad street leading south from it through the Mall to the Potomac River. Before the land was acquired by the government for the federal city, the several acres that comprise this intersection were among many owned by David Burnes. Because Burnes owned property in what later became the most populated region of the city, his sole heir, Marcia Burnes Van Ness, became the richest woman in the early city. Even though L'Enfant intended an open rectangle at this intersection, early traffic patterns sliced the space in half, dividing it into two right triangles.

Because the city developed slowly, most of the parks planned at intersections throughout the city were neglected until after the Civil War. The two triangles at this intersection, located in one of the most bustling regions of the city, were among the earliest open spaces developed as parks. As early as 1853, Congress allocated $5,000 to the Department of the Interior to improve them. The stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and Capitol was among few roads in the early city to be cleared and paved. Although it was one of the only roadways consistently maintained throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, travel on Pennsylvania Avenue was still notoriously difficult, hindered by huge holes, puddles, dust, and mud. Nevertheless, it was the most direct route between the city's most important buildings and was soon lined with a variety of dwellings, boarding houses, hotels, saloons, and stores.

Boscke's 1857-61 map of the city, compiled on the eve of the Civil War, shows five city squares facing on to the rectangular space: two trapezoids on the west and east, City Square Nos. 255 and 291, respectively; the large City Square No. 254 on the north; and two small blocks, City Square Nos. 255 and 256, on the south side flanking Thirteen-and-a-Half-Street. The map shows the National Theater in City Square No. 254 facing the space from the north--the second in a series of five theaters to be located there since 1835.[2] Facing onto the northwest corner of the space from

[2] Goode, Capital Losses, 353-55.

City Square No. 225 was the famous Willard Hotel, comprised of seven two-and-one-half-story rowhouses that stood on the corner since 1818. Under Henry Willard's management the hotel was expanded in the mid nineteenth century and became one of the most prominent hostelries in the city. Diplomats, statesmen, and famous performers were among its occupants; during the Civil War it was filled to capacity and served as a vital meeting place for military officers and politicians.[3]

Although the war brought prosperity to the Willard, it strained the city's infrastructure, including Pennsylvania Avenue. Fixed streetcar tracks were laid down the center of the roadway in 1862 in an effort to save the roadbed from the constant wear and tear of the frequent "free-wheeling" streetcars. Nevertheless, heavy army wagons transporting soldiers and equipment along this vital route destroyed much of the road surface.

Soon after the war, in 1867, jurisdiction of the federal land throughout the city was transferred from the Department of the Interior to the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPB&G) of the Army Corps of Engineers. In 1871 Washington was granted the status of a territory, and the new local Board of Public Works, under the leadership of Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, began to oversee vast infrastructural improvements throughout the city. OPB&G chief Orville Babcock worked closely with Shepherd to improve the city's parks. In an inventory of the reservations in 1872, Babcock described the two triangles at this intersection as having iron fences, but unimproved, probably having fallen to disrepair since initial improvements almost twenty years earlier. The triangle on the southwest side of the avenue measured 12,828 square feet and that on the northeast was 12,687 square feet. The same year as Babcock's survey, the Board of Public Works paved Pennsylvania Avenue with wood blocks, which were economical and reputedly muffled the noisy clatter of horses' hoofs. Wood paving was not known for durability, however, and several years after the completion of the new roadway was celebrated in a grand parade, the surface was so rotten that it had to be replaced. By this time, the short-lived territorial government had dissolved in debt and scandal, so the new paving was undertaken by the city board of commissioners.

Despite the fall of the Shepherd administration in 1874, the drastic improvements it accomplished lifted Washington from the ranks of a small southern village to a booming metropolis. The scale of the buildings erected around this intersection at the time clearly illustrate the changes taking place citywide. Beginning in the 1870s, the three- and four-story Federal-style buildings that first lined the avenue were gradually replaced by larger Victorian structures. One of the first buildings erected in this second phase of growth was the five-story Renaissance Revival headquarters of the National Republican newspaper, built on the south side of City Square No. 256 in 1871.[4] The adjacent City Square No. 255 was occupied at the time by the Washington Cable Railroad powerhouse.[5]

When the OPB&G sought to manage the land under its jurisdiction by

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[3] Goode, Capital Losses, 170-72.

[4] Goode, Capital Losses, 336-38.

[5] Baist, 1887.

assigning numbers to each of its reservations in 1884, the triangles here were designated as Reservation Nos. 30 and 31, and they had grown considerably since the 1872 survey: the former was 18,482 square feet and the latter 20,390 square feet. Both were enclosed with heavy iron-rail fences and planted with large trees, but otherwise unimproved. Over the next decade, as the buildings around the parks grew, the OPB&G transformed the parcels into welcome green breathing spaces amid the growing metropolis. After the two-story National Theater--the fourth on the site--burned, it was replaced in 1885 with the five-story Italianate New National Theater. The National Republican Building, purchased in 1886 by a railroad company, was almost doubled in size and heightened one story in 1893. Also that year, the Washington Post moved to its new five-story Romanesque headquarters several lots west of the National Theater. When the National Post Office building was completed near the southeast corner of the space in 1899, its 315'-tall bell tower was the highest pinnacle in the city save the Capitol dome and Washington Monument. The old Willard Hotel also grew in size when it was replaced in 1900 with a massive, twelve-story Beaux Arts facility.

When the OPB&G resurveyed its parks in 1894, the triangles here, now designated as Reservation Nos. 32 and 33, had been almost fully improved. South of the avenue, Reservation No. 32--now reduced to 16,270 square feet--was planted with grass, supplied with irrigation pipes, and anticipated to "be highly improved at an early day." North of the avenue, Reservation No. 33, increased slightly to 21,021 square feet, was highly improved. The surface was raised several feet in the center and the whole reservation was planted with ornamental evergreen and deciduous shrubs and surrounded with a low granite curb. Asphalt walks led to a large iron flower vase and a triangular fountain basin capped with ornamental coping of dressed stone from Euclid, Ohio. A water trough on the north side of the park near the roadway--probably installed by the Washington Humane Society--provided relief for thirsty horses.

In 1889 Reservation No. 33 was selected as a site for a statue to honor Civil War hero Philip Sheridan, but instead it received an equestrian statue of Brig. Gen. Count Casimir Pulaski in 1910.[6] Erected to honor the Polish military leader who volunteered to figbt with the Americans in the Revolutionary War, the statue was designed by Polish sculptor Kasimiriez Chodzinski and was dedicated May 11, 1910.

Reservation No. 32 had been transferred from the OPB&G to the District of Columbia in 1904 and was connected to City Square No. 255, which was to become the site for a new District Municipal Building. E Street was closed when the two parcels were merged into one and the land north of the building was formed into an elaborate forecourt. After the District Municipal Building was completed in 1908, a portrait statue of "Boss" Shepherd was erected on its grounds, the first city monument honoring a Washington native. Reservation No. 33, still under OPB&G management, was redesigned in 1914. The center of the reservation was raised with mounded earth, and steps were installed to lead up from the surrounding sidewalks to the wide straight path that connected a small circle at the west corner, occupied by an ornamental vase, and the Pulaski statue on the east. The wide, elevated walk was

[6] An equestrian statue of Sheridan was erected in Sheridan Circle, Reservation No. 57A, at Massachusetts Avenue and 23rd Street in 1908.

lined with concrete benches. The character of the buildings around the intersection changed slightly when the National Theater was replaced once again in 1922 with a modern structure, as was the National Examiner's old building on the south side of the square, after it burned in a fire in 1916.

The major changes that transpired in the neighborhood in the late 1920-30s were largely the result of events that happened around the turn of the century. In 1901-02, in honor of the city's centennial, a congressional commission was formed at the request of Michigan Senator James McMillan to study the city and propose improvements. One of the major projects envisioned by the renowned designers on the commission, was the creation of a complex of monumental, classically ornamented government buildings in the triangular region formed by Pennsylvania Avenue, the Mall, and 15th Street. The neighborhood south of the avenue, known for its filth and its lawless, immoral population, was to be entirely cleared for this grand federal office complex. This plan lay dormant until the late 1920s when it was finally set in motion under the supervision of Andrew Mellon with the help of the Commission of Fine Arts, a watchdog of the McMillan scheme. Charles Moore, who served as chairman of the CFA from 1915-37--through most of the building effort--had been secretary of the 1901-02 committee. The District Building was designed in a Neoclassical style, perhaps in deference to the scheme, but when the federal building project finally began, the District Building was almost two decades old.

Construction of the Federal Triangle reopened E Street north of the District building and the Shepherd statue was moved to a newly configured Reservation No. 32 that was significantly reduced in size, resembling a green island amid a stream of busy streets. City Square No. 226 west of the intersection was completely cleared of its buildings so it could be landscaped as a forecourt for the new Department of Commerce building to its south.[7]

After the clamor of World War II died down, the population of the inner city decreased for the first time as residents fled from crime, congestion, and parking shortages to the growing suburbs. The flight from downtown changed the character of the formerly lively street. Small audiences and conflicts over integration caused the National Theater to convert to a movie house in 1948, while less savory entertainment was offered nearby, such as the large billiards hall on the east side of the intersection on 13th Street. Although the area lost some of its vibrant nightlife, during the day the intersection was crammed with the cars of commuting suburbanites. In an effort to eliminate a bottleneck at this intersection, several hundred square feet of Reservation No. 33--officially named Pulaski Park in 1954--were transferred to the District of Columbia in 1958. A two-lane roadway was carved through the west end of the triangle to lubricate the flow of automobiles at this interchange. The remaining portion was then redesigned by the National Park Service--which had gained jurisdiction of the reservations from the OPB&G in 1933. The new design by Albert Rutledge, set in place in 1960, included azaleas, Japanese holly, English yew, magnolias, with evergreen wintercreeper and carpet bugle as groundcover.

Despite such efforts to improve the stretch of roadway between the Capitol

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[7] HABS report, DC-474, 3.

and White House, by the 1960s the route was widely considered a disgrace to the nation, lined by deteriorating structures on the north side and lifeless, office buildings on the south. Noticing its condition during his inaugural parade in 1961, President John F. Kennedy made a comment that initiated a three-decade program to improve and redevelop the avenue. This effort, finally made law and overseen by the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC), effected the greatest change to this intersection to date.

Although the open space was recognized as an important element of the L'Enfant Plan, more than two-thirds of the "plaza" space was consumed by roadways. With respect to the L'Enfant scheme, PADC planned to restore the space as a rectangular park, although it had never been interpreted as such. This was achieved by merging the 0.41 remaining acres of Reservation No. 33 with the former Reservation No. 32 and closing the streets and avenue that crossed through the space. The large rectangle, designed by architect Robert Venturi and landscape architect George Patton, features a large raised parterre illustrating a segment of L'Enfant's plan in patterned stone. In addition to depicting L'Enfant's vision for Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and Capitol, the pavement is also engraved with quotations made by famous people about Washington. The original plan called for a 6'-tall stone model of the White House and 20'-tall stone Capitol on their respective sites on the "map," as well as two 100'-tall marble pylons, but after a lengthy review process, all vertical elements were eliminated to preserve L'Enfant's vista between the Capitol and White House. As it was finally developed, the Mall and Ellipse are represented in the space by grassy panels, and the locations of the White House and Capitol are indicated by their floor plans inlaid in bronze. Although the Shepherd statue was removed and placed in storage before construction began, the new plan incorporated the Pulaski statue, which remains in place on the east side of the plaza. The west side of the park is now enlivened by a large fountain planted with ornamental grasses.

Dedicated in 1980, Western Plaza became the centerpiece of a transformed neighborhood. The vacant City Square No. 226 was redeveloped as Pershing Park with terraced gardens, a monument to World War II Gen. John A. Pershing, and a skating rink. North of the intersection, the J.W. Marriott Hotel, the Shops at National Place shopping center, and the newly renovated National Theater fill most of City Square No. 253. The block on the east side of the square, formerly occupied by a billiards hall, is now encompassed by 1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, which boasts 206,000 square feet of office and retail space. The grand Willard Hotel, vacant since it closed in 1968, was renovated and reopened in the 1980s. To the south, the District Building remains in City Square No. 255. City Square No. 256, which has served since it was cleared in the 1970s as a great parking lot, is now being excavated for part of the International Cultural and Trade Center.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Overall dimensions: The landscaped rectangle is 600' x 160' and encompasses 2.2 acres.

B. Materials:

1. Pathways, paving: The rectangle is surrounded by perimeter walks. Ramps lead from the east and west sides and stairs lead from the north and south to the central, elevated parterre. L'Enfant's map is depicted in different colors of granite and engraved quotes are scattered throughout the space.

2. Vegetation:

   a. Grass, groundcover: Grass is planted on the parterre to illustrate the locations of the Mall and Ellipse.

   b. Trees, shrubs, hedges: Trees are planted in cutouts in the paved terrace near the Pulaski statue. A large bed between the statue and the map parterre is planted with rose bushes. The southwest corner of the plaza features pin oaks.

   c. Flowers, seasonal plantings: Ten large saucer-shaped urns line the north and south sides of the space and are planted seasonally. Ornamental grasses grow in the pool on the west side of the park, and flowers are seasonally planted among the shrubs in the bed near the Pulaski statue. A casual mixture of perennials are planted in beds adjacent to the north and south sidewalks.

3. Structures:

   a. Fences, gates, retaining walls: Low stone walls with inset light fixtures surround the perimeter of the raised parterre. A low wall also encircles the paved terrace around the Pulaski statue.

   b. Benches: Metal-frame, wood-slat benches are placed in a semicircle around the Pulaski statue. Similar benches form circles around several trees in the east portion of the park.

   c. Statues: The equestrian statue of Brig. Gen. Count Casimir Pulaski was designed by sculptor Kasimiriez Chodzinski and architect Albert Ross and erected in the park in 1910. The more than 8'-tall bronze statue of the Polish-American Revolutionary War hero stands on a 9'-tall granite base inscribed with the names of the battles in which he fought.

   d. Fountains, pools: A large water display fills the west side of the park. It consists of an elevated pool that overflows over smooth round edges into pool below.

   e. Lighting: Small lights are recessed into the low walls surrounding the central parterre. Spotlights on poles illuminate the Pulaski statue.

C. Site:

1. Character of surrounding structures: The space is surrounded by tall buildings, but still retains an open feel due to the width of the surrounding roadways. There is a large park to the west of the intersection and a gaping hole to the southeast where a new building is under construction.

2. Traffic patterns: Pennsylvania Avenue traffic is diverted along the south side of the reservation on the eight-lane-wide E Street. Two lanes of two-way traffic also run on E street north of the park and on 13th and 14th streets to the east and west.

3. Vistas: This park was designed to emphasize Pennsylvania Avenue's vistas. The Capitol terminates an impressive vista to the southeast, and the Treasury building is visible to the northwest.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

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B. Park plans and early views: See Supplemental Information below for a list of attached plans. Additional plans are located at the Office of Land Use, National Capital Region, NPS.

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of the City of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

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